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Ambiguity as a Condition of Possibility: the European Endowment for Democracy and Democracy Promotion in the Caucasus

Simon Tordjman*

Abstract

In June 2012, the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) was established with an aim to address the shortcomings of existing EU programmes and provide direct assistance to opposition forces and civil society groups in both the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood. According to its Statutes, the EED is governed by EU member states and institutions, but is officially registered as a private foundation under the Belgian law. Institutional ambiguity was meant to enable the EED to operate in a more flexible and less bureaucratic manner. Yet, the blurred position of the Endowment has also catalysed a constellation of interests and divergent approaches related to the mere methods and objectives of democratisation policies (regime change vs. incremental transformation, empowering subjects vs. democratising institutions, visibility vs. discrete operations).

Through a particular focus on EED interventions in Armenia and Azerbaijan, based on participant observation and a series of interviews conducted in Brussels and the Caucasus, the contribution argues that ambiguity does not represent an obstacle to the operationalisation of the EU democracy support policy. On the contrary, oversights and differences of interpretation about the “problem” to be addressed and the methods to be implemented constitute the very condition of possibility for the autonomisation of democracy assistance and the maintenance of several initiatives in the region.

Key words: European Union, European Endowment for Democracy, Democratisation, Caucasus, Civil society

Introduction

More than 10 years after the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and regardless of the adoption of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, most Eastern European and Caucasian countries are marked by democratic stagnation or deterioration. While Armenia has witnessed a limited deterioration of political pluralism, Azerbaijan remains affected by regular and severe crackdowns on political opposition, civil society movements and individual freedom. Since the accession of Ilham Aliyev to the Presidency in 2003, the weak separation of powers has enabled the president and the *New Azerbaijan Party* (YAP) to maintain their control and domination over the political life at both the national and local levels. At the same time, political opposition forces remain badly organised, marred by internal divisions and poorly funded (Sultanova, 2014). Additionally, persistent tensions over the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict have fuelled nationalism and, in turn, provide further excuse for the repression of dissident voices (Simão, 2012). In Armenia, blatant corruption based on patronage networks between politics and business contributes to an atmosphere of resignation and a lack of trust in the political system. Nevertheless, civil society development has not deteriorated to the extent of Azerbaijan. For instance, if the September 2013 decision of the Armenian authorities to join the Russia-led Customs' Union had triggered

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an intensified fear amongst civil society activists that such a decision would be followed by a crackdown on democracy activists, the 2015 law on non-governmental organisations that provides some opportunities for civil society development contributed to allay the fears of many activists and analysts (Mirzoyan, 2015).

The European Endowment for Democracy was established in 2011 by the Council of the EU¹ as “a flexible, demand driven, and independent democracy support organisation”² to provide financial assistance to pro-democracy actors in the European Neighbourhood. Yet, since its establishment, the institutional location and strategy of the institution have been marked by a certain ambiguity. EED Statutes insist on the need for the organisation to perform a “gap-filling” function, “avoid duplication and ensure coherence, synergy, complementarity and added-value with the activities carried out under EU financing instruments” (art. 3). The EED website also stresses that “it will engage in regular consultations with relevant EU institutions and other actors in order to avoid duplication and ensure synergy, complementarity and added-value to EU instruments and Member States bilateral activities” (<https://www.democracyendowment.eu/about-eed/>). At the same time, the EED makes repeated efforts to stress its independence and mark a strict boundary line vis-à-vis EU policies and instruments. The paper will then question the rationale and effects of the founding and apparent ambiguity of the EED. Looking at the situation in the Caucasus, what do the creation and operations of the EED tell us about the EU democracy promotion efforts? Does it represent a shift and/or an obstacle to the implementation of the EU democratisation policy?

Building on Giusti and Fassi’s work (2014), the paper will show that the EED does not clearly fit into a revised EU democracy promotion strategy but rather represents an equivocal mechanism, adding complexity to the European institutional architecture and operational mechanisms. Through a particular focus on Armenia and Azerbaijan, the contribution will further highlight that ambiguity and misunderstandings do not impede the development of EU democracy promotion efforts. Well-understood misunderstandings rather bear important effects and should be regarded as a condition of possibility for the establishment of democracy assistance as a stand-alone field within the European landscape.

The persistent uncertainty of the EU democracy promotion strategy

The EU nowadays routinely refers to democratisation as a cornerstone of its foreign policy and international identity (Lloyd, 2010). According to Richard Youngs (2008), “the EU claims to have developed an approach to democracy promotion based on patience, a long-term perspective and sensitivity to the primary role of local actors. (...) EU democracy strategy has hitherto been based on three pillars: the use of positive incentives (in particular, where applicable, the offer of EU membership) to stimulate reform; the selective use of punitive measures and diplomatic pressure; and the funding of democracy programmes.” (p. 1). Yet, building on Schmitter and Brower’s (2000) definition of a democracy promotion strategy as the combination of a specific goal, a means of action and a target level, the scope and contents of the EU approach remain conceptually and operationally blurred.

Framing democracy support in the security-development nexus

Democratisation does not appear as a stand-alone element within the EU external policy framework. Instead, it constitutes an overarching principle located across the two separate fields of peace and development, each of which bear distinct rationales as well as specific normative and operational challenges.

1 Council of the European Union (2011, 20 December), *Declaration on the Establishment of a European Endowment for Democracy*, Brussels, 18764/11.

2 European Endowment for Democracy. (2014). *Report for the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament. July 2013 – September 2014*. Brussels, p. 9

Enthusiasm for democracy promotion first appeared in the US (Guilhot, 2005) but rapidly expanded to Europe, where in the 1990s new actors (old members of the EU as well as newest democracies and former recipients of Western democracy assistance) have progressively embarked on various attempts aiming at supporting democracy abroad. Yet, optimism that emerged in the early 1990s gradually led to a more cautious appreciation of the impacts of Western democracy programmes on political pluralism and stability. Despite increasing references to democratic values, European peace interventions in the 2000s remain primarily driven by the imperative of security. Such sequencing relies on a body of work, which from the late 1990s emphasised the destabilising effects of a premature democratisation processes. Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder (1995) suggest that democratisation programs could deteriorate precarious political situations. Roland Paris (2004) similarly refutes the idea that a market economy and liberal democracy constitute the prerequisites for a lasting peace: elections have an important but only a secondary role in peace processes and institution building should be prioritised over democratisation.

While the peace-democracy nexus has been increasingly marked by a seal of prudence, the relationship between development and democratisation reveals a different picture. The pitfalls encountered by many aid initiatives based on North-South budget transfers in the 1980s gradually made democratic governance a key component of economic development. The inner logic of the developmentalist paradigm then got reversed: political rights and civil liberties were no longer seen as by-products but the mere condition of economic development. Such assumptions have rapidly been integrated into the EU normative framework. A November 1991 resolution of the Council on Democracy, Human Rights and Development (Res. No.10107/1991) conditioned the provision of financial assistance to Central and Eastern Europe countries to the respect of human rights standards and democracy procedures.³ Twenty years later, the EU Agenda for Change (2011), aimed to “increase the impact of EU development policy”, states that aid programs are to be carried in parallel to efforts dedicated to advancing “democratisation, free and fair elections, the functioning of institutions, media freedom and access to internet, protection of minorities, the rule of law and judicial systems in partner countries”. The document further stresses that “the objectives of development, democracy, human rights, good governance and security are intertwined”.⁴

Despite the progressive integration of democratisation as a transversal dimension of both the development and the peace agendas, the operational dimensions of the EU democracy support strategy remain vague. The recently adopted EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (2015-2019) is aimed at enabling the EU to advance democracy and human rights through “more focused action, systematic and coordinated use of the instruments at its disposal”⁵. Just like any other strategic framework, it is supposed to serve as a guiding document to “improve (...) the coherence of its actions on human rights and democracy”⁶. It is meant to specify the division of labour between EU actors through a list of responsibilities, envisaged goals and actions. The Plan includes five overarching objectives entitled: 1) boosting ownership of local actors, 2) addressing human rights challenges, 3) ensuring a comprehensive human rights approach to conflicts and crises, 4) fostering better coherence and consistency, and 5) a more effective EU human rights and democracy support policy. It also specifies 34 sub-goals with 113 related activities, related timelines and responsible entities. Despite the apparent precision of the Plan, the wording of these actions remains broad. They mainly consist of generic references to the need for further “coordination” and do not systematically attach financial commitments or targets to the specific objectives. The Plan also tends to dilute responsibilities between the different EU institutions. Among the 113 specific listed interventions, 107 (95%) fall under shared responsibilities and only 5 are to be assumed by a single entity⁷. Moreover, the fact that 93 actions (82%) are to be undertaken by three or more entities tends to further weaken the ownership and accountability for the activities to be conducted. Finally, most actions do not include any specific deadlines: 66 actions are indicated as

³ EU Council of Ministers (1991, 28 November), *Resolution of the Council and of the Member States Meeting in the Council on Human Rights, Democracy and Development*, Doc. no. 10107/91, Brussels(1991, 28 November)ated nce opean Cracy: European Commission, 28 November 1991

⁴ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “Increasing the impact of EU Development Policy: an Agenda for Change”, COM(2011) 637 final, 2011

⁵ Council Conclusions of the action plan on human rights and democracy 2015-2019, 20 July 2015, 10897/18

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ For one action, no responsible entity is indicated.

being “on-going” and refer to existing actions rather than new initiatives.

From top-down to bottom-up

Democratisation has long been conceived as inherently domestic and institution-centred, involving the establishment of multiparty systems, electoral processes and transparent accountability channels. In this conception, elites, convinced and trained in democratic behaviour, have a central role in enhancing democratisation (Higley & Burton, 2006). However, believing that the global democratic wave was over(-rated), several scholars have articulated a more cautionary view on democracy support methods, focusing exclusively on electoral competition and institution building (Carothers, 2002). Since the mid-1990s, grounded in Robert Putnam’s assumption according to which the greater the density and activity of civil society is, the better it is for democracy (Putnam, 1993), local people were no longer seen as passive beneficiaries but as active contributors to political change (Blair, 1995; Hadenius, Ugglä, 1996; Ottaway, Carothers, 2000; Howell, 2002).

The EU democracy promotion policy does not provide a clear-cut orientation between these two orientations. The EU Action Plan on Democracy and Human Rights as well as the ENP and the EaP frameworks maintain a certain degree of permeability between government-centred initiatives and those focusing on civil society development. For instance, the 2011 ENP Review highlighted the need for the EU to focus on “partnership with societies alongside with the relations with governments”.⁸ Consequently, a Civil Society Forum (CSF) was established in 2011 to provide a venue to further “partnership with society” within the EaP Framework and to “boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making”.⁹ However, despite its achievements (Shapovalova & Youngs, 2012; Kostanyan, 2014), the CSF only represents a limited add-on mechanism and remains based on governments and on “the promise of closer integration with the EU” (Kirova & Freizer, 2015, p.9). The EU Action Plan on Democracy and Human Rights similarly echoes the fine balance between strengthening state capacities and an actor-centred approach that would mainly focus on empowering social and political movements (Bunce & Wolchik, 2010). It repeatedly emphasises the need to encourage consultations with both civil society organisations and governmental bodies and refer to public institutions alongside civil society organisations in almost all the sections.

Such a combination is reproduced at the country level, where governments still constitute the main beneficiaries of EU external assistance. The *Single Support Framework for EU-support to Armenia*, which sets strategic objectives and priorities for cooperation in 2014-2017, puts a strong emphasis on public institutions. While the *Framework* states that “support to civil society will be mainstreamed throughout all three sectors of intervention”, it plans to dedicate less than 5% of the overall cooperation budget (€140-170 million) for direct support to civil society organisations.¹⁰ The *EU Country Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society* (2014-2017) similarly focuses on strengthening capacities and participation of CSOs in policy dialogue but does not commit additional financial means or set up clear deadlines and financial objectives for this goal. The website of the EU Delegation in Erevan provides information about 29 supported projects listed as contributing to “Governance, democracy, human rights and support for economic and institutional reforms”. The projects cover the 2009-2015 period and amount to a total of around € 24 million. Local NGOs are listed as primary beneficiaries for 22 projects; yet, they only receive 18% (€ 4,325,606) of the total amount of funding. At the same time, international organisations and NGOs as well as foreign companies and governments benefited from more than €19 million from the EU for promoting democratic reforms in Armenia. International and local NGOs are often involved in the implementation of these large projects through a cascade system of implementation. However, they tend to be marginalised from the overall project design and restricted to a largely operational function. In Azerbaijan, the EU remains one of the main foreign donors supporting civil society, with over 60 projects funded for a total EU contribution of over 13 million AZN (€ 7,3 million)

⁸ Joint Communication by the High Representative of The Union For Foreign Affairs And Security Policy and the European Commission, “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood. A review of European Neighbourhood Policy”, Brussels, 25 May 2011

⁹ Retrieved from CSF Website: <http://eap-csf.eu/en/about-eap-csf/>

¹⁰ European Union, « Programming of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) - 2014-2020. Single Support Framework for EU support »

between 2007 and 2013. However, due to the combination of the cumbersome application process of EU funds and the restrictions to NGO operations in the country, most of these projects are implemented by large, well-established and/or foreign organisations. The recent restrictions on the activities of local CSO as well as the fear of endangering local activists have contributed to further limiting the level of foreign support to democracy and civil society activists in Azerbaijan.

The European Endowment for Democracy was established in 2011 as an innovative tool for the EU to provide assistance to democracy supporters in the field. Based on the need to tailor interventions and “on the respect for every partner’s specificity and their own reform path”¹¹, the EED was largely inspired by the US-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) to provide flexible support to political groups, non-registered NGOs, trade unions and other social groups in the countries of the European Neighbourhood. According to the first EED Director Jerzy Pomianowski,

“The EU democracy instruments are extremely important, but their procedures take too much time and are complicated. EU funding has a timeline of 12 to 18 months, and the technical expertise required inhibits emerging civil society actors from applying. All of this results in a mechanism that does not support the pioneers – those that effectuate democratic demands on the ground.” (quoted in Youngs & Brudzinska, 2012, p.2)

As highlighted in its founding slogan, the EED is supposed to serve as a “lean, dynamic structure, with low operational costs”¹² to “support the unsupported” – e.g. “those civil society actors who are not the “usual suspects” receiving funding from the “usual” funding sources”¹³. Its operations started in the summer of 2013, and since then it has supported around 100 initiatives per year in the 15 countries in its mandate. The EED first annual report published in 2014 indicates that 32% of the projects that were supported in 2013-2014 are labelled as “politically risky”.¹⁴ Additionally, 64 out of 118 funded initiatives were of less than € 50,000, while for instance the smallest grant provided by the EU Delegation in Armenia was for € 150,000. The high threshold implemented by the EU mainly results from administrative and managerial constraints but bears important effects upon the type of projects and beneficiaries eventually supported. Large grants contribute to the predominance of umbrella organisations, which eventually allocate subsidies to smaller groups. Smaller amounts allow for direct support to less structured organisations.

Building on the analytical framework proposed by Schmitter and Brower, Giusti and Fassi argue that “the adoption of the EED can be interpreted as a shift in the theoretical approaches on which the EU policies of democracy promotion are based” (Giusti & Fassi, 2014, p. 123). The EED focus on actors rather than structures and its ambition to support emerging voices rather than institutional actors or well-established NGOs would be part of a wider move of the EU strategy from an elite-driven approach towards a stronger focus on “actors with a more marked political profile” (*Ibid.*, p.122). Yet, various elements call for a more cautious assessment. At least since the early 2000s, the adoption of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights in 2000 and the establishment of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) in 2006, civil society support has been explicitly incorporated into the EU framework on democracy and human rights. According to a regulation adopted in 2006, the EIDHR is aimed at “enhancing respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the countries and regions where they are most threatened” and “supporting civil society in its role of promoting human rights and democracy, its action for the peaceful conciliation of particular interests and its duty of representation and political participation”.¹⁵ The EIDHR is also “meant to address sensitive political issues and

11 EC JOIN (2012) 14 final

12 *Ibid.*

13 Global Forum for Media Development, “Funder’s Perspective: Interview With Jerzy Pomianowski, director of the European Endowment for Democracy”, 10 March 2014 de. [://gfm-site/news/417/Funder%Eours.otiationst%20devices%20are%20ors%20opment%20in%20the%20field.%20I-recognized%20misunderstandings%20about%20the%20](http://gfm-site/news/417/Funder%Eours.otiationst%20devices%20are%20ors%20opment%20in%20the%20field.%20I-recognized%20misunderstandings%20about%20the%20)

14 European Endowment for Democracy, *Annual Report 2014*, Brussels, 2014

15 Regulation (EC) No 1889/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 on establishing a financing instrument for the promotion of democracy and human rights worldwide

provide flexible assistance” and could “be used without host government consent”¹⁶. Although the implementation of the EIDHR has faced significant obstacles and often favours well-established Western-style NGOs over emerging forces (Tordjman, 2008; Lutsevych, 2013), the emphasis on civil society development is older than the establishment of the EED. Additionally, in all countries of EED operations and in parallel to EED activities, EIDHR funding schemes are available.

The distinction between the EIDHR and the EED would then be based on their operating models rather than distinct strategic orientations. While the EIDHR operates through country-wide or global calls for proposals with strict deadlines and a large set of documents to be submitted, the EED operates in an ongoing manner and requires much less information from the applicant. Hence, for many EU officials, the EED does represent an innovative democracy promotion tool. Yet, it is not the symbol of a revised strategy but rather consists of a technical response to the administrative pitfalls of EU instruments, including the EIDHR. An EU official involved in EIDHR management states that the “EED difference is only based on the small size of the organisation. It is not different from EIDHR. It is just a younger and a more flexible version of it. EED will necessarily end up with the same challenges as EIDHR as it grows”.¹⁷

Talking about a paradigm shift in the EU democracy promotion strategy would also and more fundamentally require a general consensus at both the EU and the EED level. But even if agreed by the Council, the establishment of the EED was not a consensual process among Member States (Kostanyan & Nasleniak, 2012) and many of them still regard the EED as responding “more to some EU member states’ national interest than to the need to improve the overall EU democratisation strategy”.¹⁸ While the number of EU countries contributing to the EED budget has expanded over the last three years, with 18 European states contributing to the EED 2015 budget, some of the main European countries remain rather sceptical about the opportunity to strengthen EED operations. For instance, a representative from a Member State representation to the EU states that “Poland was successful at establishing the EED. It was a brilliant diplomatic move but we have other priorities”¹⁹.

The sense and effect of the EED upon the overall EU democracy promotion architecture is unclear. The ambiguity first relates to the lack of a precise definition of the EU strategy itself, which fails to provide a clear articulation between the democratisation, development and pacification imperatives. Additionally, while civil society support has certainly gained momentum over the last 15 years, public institutions still represent the main target and recipient of EU funds. In this context, the scope and resources of EED interventions remain very limited. Its overall budget of €22.82 million (2013-2015) to cover the 15 countries of its geographic mandate²⁰ makes its contributions only marginal when compared to the overall EU assistance to the neighbourhood.

The practical values of well-understood misunderstandings

Rather than marking a clear-cut strategic shift, the EED performs a two-fold role within the field of EU democracy promotion. It first gathers a constellation of interests and divergent approaches related to the sequence, the methods and the target levels of democracy assistance. It also serves as a vehicle for the various actors interacting in the field to promote a version of what a legitimate approach to democracy support ought to be. In this context, the concept of configuration that insists on the tensions between interdependent players or actors in interaction may be heuristically relevant. As highlighted by Norbert Elias, “interdependence among players is a necessary condition to the existence of a specific configuration. It is an interdependence between allies, but also between opponents” (Elias, 1991, p. 157). Quintaneiro further specifies that “a configuration exists when two or more individuals or human groups establish some kind

16 European Parliament, “How the EU budget is spent. Briefing note: European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights”, September 2015

17 Personal observation, Brussels, November 2013

18 Quoted in Giusti and Fassi, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 122

19 Author’s notes from a non-recorded interview with a representative from a Member State delegation, Brussels, June 2016

20 European Endowment for Democracy (2015). *Annual Report*, 2015

of link fostered by the dependences they have on one another, and which render them capable of exercising some form of reciprocal constraint” (Quintaneiro, 2004, p. 58). As a hybrid actor in the configuration of European democracy promotion, the EED catalyses a range of different and sometimes opposite logics contributing to institutional misunderstanding(s) and operational ambiguity. However, even if the EED is marked by oversights and differences of interpretation about the ‘problem’ to be addressed and the methods to be implemented, these elements do not represent an obstacle but rather serve as an enabling vector for the development of democracy promotion initiatives.

The EED as an embodied ambiguity

Ambiguity is consubstantial with the EED’s structure and operations. It appears at the three interrelated levels of its institutional architecture, strategic orientations and operational practices.

As “an entity not directly associated with EU diplomacy or the European Commission, but consistent with EU policies” (Youngs & Brudzinska, 2012, p. 2), the EED is an example of a blurred institution, located at the intersection of public and private institutions. The EED is registered under Belgian law as a private foundation, autonomous from the EU institutions and Member States. Yet, its establishment results from a decision of the Council and its main source of funding comes from the Commission. Just like the US *National Endowment for Democracy*, the EED institutional architecture responds to a double need for differentiation and flexibility. By operating as a filter between the origin and the recipients of funds, the EED allows the donors to mark their distance vis-à-vis the supported initiatives while, at the same time and when acceptable, claim ownership for the projects funded by the EED.

As noted by Barbara Conry about the *National Endowment for Democracy*, « that convoluted organisational structure seems to be based on the premise that government money, if filtered through enough layers of bureaucracy, becomes “private” funding” (Conry, 1993). Yet, the EED appears even more closely linked to the EU architecture than its US counterpart. At the policy level, annual reports of the EED are presented at both the European Parliament and the Council.²¹ Institutionally, the EED’s main governing body – the Board of Governors (BoG) – includes representatives of the European External Action Service, the European Commission, as well as nine members of the European Parliament. In practice though, no interference seems to have taken place in the formal context of the BoG meetings, where discussions tend to remain very general and do not enter into the details of EED operations²². Similarly, while the bulk of the EED’s operational budget remains provided by the European Commission, EED staff insist on the independent feature of their organisation and the absence of direct interference by the Commission. In an interview conducted in March 2014, Jerzy Pomianowski states that

“ We maintain that independent position. Of course there is always the political sensitivity around who does what. Some embassies in Azerbaijan do not want to be seen funding democracy projects when negotiating an energy deal. In many cases, EU member states want to remain neutral. That is why we have an independent commission of experts deciding on the grant applications. The EU member states are represented on the EED board of governors, but they do not decide on individual grants” ²³

The selection process of proposals to be funded includes the following steps: a short summary of the project is first uploaded into an online application form. Then, if relevant, programme officers enter into a dialogue with the applicant to further refine the application, which will eventually be presented to the Executive Committee in charge of taking the ultimate funding decision. However, beyond the generic principles expressed in the EED Statutes, there is no agreed strategic framework to guide EED interventions and prioritise the disbursement of funds. According to

21 Retrieved from: <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/fr/news/eed-presents-report-to-eus-political>

22 Personal observation, 2013-2014

23 Retrieved from <http://gfmd.info/en/site/news/417/Funder%E2%80%99s-Perspective-With-Jerzy-Pomianowski-director-of-the-European-Endowment-for-Democracy.htm>

an EED programme officer, “At the moment, [the strategy] is kind of subjective”.²⁴ The selection criteria and priorities remain vague and provide programme managers with a significant degree of flexibility over the selection of grantees. Two years after the launch of its activities, the EED had supported over a hundred initiatives in the areas of press freedom, electoral participation, legal assistance, and youth activism. However, in the absence of strategic priorities, the common feature of the vast majority of the projects funded by the EED revolves around the type of support and beneficiaries – e.g. direct disbursement of funds toward non-governmental actors (Civil Society Organisations, individuals, political movements...) – rather than thematic priorities.

The lack of a definite strategy is also reinforced by the recent feature of the (academic and political) field of democracy support, which implies that most of the democracy support professionals have been professionally socialised in other areas. At the working level, professional backgrounds of EED recruits are at the intersection of diplomacy, human rights, development and conflict resolution. Their recruitment process shows that in the absence of certified knowledge on democratisation, priority was given to a specific way of thinking and acting, based on a combination of flexibility, knowledge of project management and past professional experiences in mentoring and interacting with local movements and civil society groups. All four program managers that were recruited at the establishment of the EED had prior experience in program management within NGOs, international organisations, and/or diplomatic missions. The diversity of professional paths and careers shows that project management skills related to civil society support and participation – more than a specific theoretical knowledge of democratisation processes – have been considered of critical importance. It also illustrates the porosity and fluidity of the democracy support field.

However, far from being an obstacle to the operationalisation of democracy support, ambiguity may conversely explain the diffusion and success of the bottom-up paradigm within democracy support endeavours.

The virtues of ambiguity

Rather than marking a strategic shift in EU external policy, the EED institutional and operational flexibility illustrates an institutionalised yet functional form of ambiguity. Contrary to Finnemore and Sikkink’s causal relationship between ideational concerns and political change (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), the evolution of the EU democracy support apparatus – including the establishment and the operations of the EED – results from a marriage of convenience between different groups and actors who do not necessarily share a common vision.

The establishment and development of the EED can be linked to a form of « niche diplomacy » (Cooper, 1997) carried out by Nordic as well as some recent EU members. The various contributions provided to the EED’s 2015 programme budget show a large representation of recent EU Member States as well as significant contributions provided by Sweden and Denmark²⁵. It illustrates the renewed commitments to democracy support embraced by former European dictatorships in the early 2000s. As with Spain and Portugal in the 1970s, many of the new member states from the Eastern Neighbourhood benefited from democracy promotion activities in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, countries like the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have brought a renewed emphasis and supported increased funding from the EU for human rights and democracy work (Petrova, 2011). European new democracies’ engagement in democracy promotion may first reflect an appreciation for the assistance that they received in establishing and consolidating their own democracies after the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and 1990s. Their engagement may also be read as a strategic choice to allocate limited diplomatic, administrative and financial resources where they would be most visible. Many interviews conducted with officials from permanent representations to the EU institutions have highlighted that investing in the EED would provide great value for money and an efficient means to have a say in European foreign policy, even if it is from the margins. Other interviews conversely show that the establishment and limited scope of EED operations reassure some other Member

²⁴ Interview, Brussels, June 2016

²⁵ Contributing members include Belgium Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland

States that are more sceptical about the ability of financial instruments and/or any EU-affiliated institutions to support political change.²⁶

The attitude of the EU vis-à-vis the EED seems to have evolved since the establishment of the Endowment. While representatives of the EU institutions may have initially expressed some reluctance to partner with the Endowment in 2012, nowadays the relationship seems to be rather based on reciprocal interests and strategic uses. The recent discussion between the EED and the Commission about the possibility for the EED to administer some EU funds dedicated to democracy support in one specific country highlights such a shift. According to the EED director of programmes Peter Sondergaard, “it is good in the way that if we can do it for one country, then other countries should also come”. At the same time, he acknowledges that such a precedent would constitute a challenge for the future justification and maintenance of EU financial instruments like the EIDHR: “that’s of course why some people have paranoia about this happening and oppose some technical limits”²⁷. This, nevertheless, reveals how the EED has increasingly been mobilised by EU institutions in an attempt to (re)legitimate their own interventions and strategic orientations.

The initial fear from competition expressed by officials from the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) vis-à-vis the EED has progressively evolved into an acknowledgment of EED capacity to respond to the demands that the EU would be unwilling or unable to address: “When the funding situation becomes too difficult, we have to find other ways to provide support to local NGOs. (...) What EED is doing is really adding value. EED can do small things, they can do it quicker, they can do small amounts.”²⁸. The EED also provides a convenient vehicle for the EU to pursue equivocal objectives with its neighbours. For instance, several interviews conducted within the framework of this research indeed indicate that the EU delegation in Azerbaijan has been rather constant in exchanging information and using the EED to handle politically sensitive cases. This, in parallel to the involvement of the EEAS in (re)opening political dialogue and negotiating a new strategic partnership agreement with Baku.

Conclusion

Despite successive attempts to specify and rationalise the EU democracy support policy since the late 1990s, the architecture and devices deployed by the EU in Azerbaijan and Armenia encapsulate various visions and definitions of the issue(s) to be addressed. Yet, the lack of agreement about the ‘problem’ and the ‘solutions’ has not acted as an obstacle to the institutional and operational development of democracy support initiatives. Far from marking a paradigm shift in the EU democratisation strategy, the inherent ambiguity of the *European Endowment for Democracy* has been able to mobilise Member States and EU institutions. The diverging interpretations about the very conception of democratic transitions, the misunderstandings about the contents of the “civil society formula” and the relatively limited scale of EED operations have enabled EU actors to maintain some engagement in favour of democratic development in the field.

While the establishment and operations of the EED do not represent a shift in EU democracy support strategy, they do reflect the transformations of the field of democracy support and the development of innovative and blurring forms of external interventions. Yet, the question of whether such innovations are effective in bringing about political pluralism in authoritarian settings remains open. While ambiguity may serve as an enabling factor and generate consensus around misunderstandings that are usually well recognised by the relevant stakeholders, it may also affect the coherence, legitimacy and efficiency of the interventions, especially when new democracy support devices are exhibited in parallel to political negotiations that may lead to compromises over respect towards human rights and advancement of political liberties.

²⁶ This can be reflected by the French “wait and see” attitude consisting of attending meetings of the Board of Governors without making any financial contribution to the work of the Endowment.

²⁷ Interview, Brussels, June 2016

²⁸ Interview with an EEAS official, June 2016

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